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RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 3734
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RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 4348
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0206
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0199
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0226
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 3935
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2203
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0290
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7304
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000177

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SUBJECT: DIPLOMATS PONDER HOW TO LIFT EU SANCTIONS ON
UZBEKISTAN

REF: TASHKENT 167 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Richard B. Norland; reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. The French, British and German Ambassadors in Tashkent were pleasantly surprised by a "qualitative improvement" in the Uzbek government's handling of human rights during a Feb. 5-6 visit by Commission representatives. These ambassadors (protect) uniformly endorse termination of EU sanctions on Uzbekistan in May. They are pondering ways to educate capitals, particularly in EU states that favor sanctions but do not have a presence on the ground here (Sweden, Netherlands, Ireland). They favor U.S. help to promote understanding that gradually re-engaging, rather than isolating, Uzbekistan is more likely to advance our twin goals of improving human rights and rebuilding partnership with an important regional player on Afghanistan. End Summary.

12. (C) French Ambassador Hugues Pernet (protect) gathered UK, German and U.S. counterparts Feb. 7 to share impressions of this week's visit to Tashkent by the Commission's EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Committee. This was the first such visit in three years. The EU informed the Uzbeks (who were led by Minister of Foreign Economic Relations Elyor Ganiev) that the EU would establish full representation at the ambassadorial level in Tashkent this year -- "a big step," the German called it. The EU delegation raised child labor concerns, the flawed presidential elections, and human rights. On human rights, Pernet said he spoke about the importance of honoring the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- and was astonished when the Uzbek delegation broke into "spontaneous" applause. German Ambassador Matthias Meyer echoed his surprise. Both the French and the German were pleased that the Uzbeks had released six political prisoners (reftel) on the eve of the delegation's arrival. Although not uncommon for visiting dignitaries to be "rewarded" with gestures of this nature, they felt these releases, and the meeting with the Uzbeks, represented a "qualitative improvement" over previous experiences.

13. (C) All four ambassadors agreed that those prisoners who had been amnestied should never have been arrested in the first place. The discussion shifted to the question of how to secure more such releases, and how to improve the overall climate in Uzbekistan for human rights and the rule of law. All agreed "pressure" in the form of continued sanctions was likely to be counter-productive. The EU decision to automatically "reinforce" sanctions this May unless Uzbekistan significantly improves its performance on human rights was a source of deep concern to the EU Ambassadors (protect). The Troika will meet with Central Asian foreign ministers in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan on April 16-17. EU foreign ministers will then meet in May to make a final decision. The EU Ambassadors felt the bar had been set impossibly high given realities in Uzbekistan. The opportunity to build on recent limited progress would be lost if sanctions were reimposed, they said. Karimov wants to reduce dependence on Russia. He is also deeply concerned about NATO/ISAF staying power in Afghanistan. These factors argue for continued gradual engagement with the government of Uzbekistan in order to advance Western objectives on human rights while at the same time maximizing Uzbekistan's potential contributions as an important regional player on Afghanistan.

14. (C) No one denied there would be limits on progress. Until Karimov passes from the political stage, anything perceived as fueling outright opposition will be stifled. But short of that, meaningful steps are still possible

through dialogue and intensified engagement. Sanctions risk smothering any such hopes.

"Educating the Hard-Liners"

15. (C) The EU Ambassadors acknowledged political difficulties for capitals in endorsing an approach perceived as "soft" on human rights. British Ambassador Iain Kelly (protect) in particular said he faces an uphill battle with Whitehall in trying to make the case that May is too soon to play out prospects for better Uzbek performance on human rights. He personally believed renewing sanctions was folly. The challenge lies in changing minds in those capitals which strongly support sanctions. Perhaps not coincidentally, they tend to have no representation in Tashkent (e.g., Stockholm, the Hague, Dublin). Their views are sometimes skewed by exile opposition groups and offshore human rights NGOs whose perspective leaves out realities on the ground. The French and German Ambassadors raised the idea of sending a diplomatic delegation from Tashkent to these capitals to try to round out their picture of Uzbekistan. Alternatively, the Swedes, Dutch and Irish could be encouraged to send representatives here. Either way, they all agreed, it was important to begin the "education" process rapidly, and U.S. support was welcome.

Ambassador's Comment

16. (C) I share the view that we have much more to gain through gradual engagement with the Uzbeks than we do via sanctions and isolation. Right now, the threat of a return to isolation is best kept implicit, dangling well over the horizon, rather than set at a fixed point in time the way it is in EU policy (we may have to face similar issues when U.S. legislation kicks in this spring). We are seeing some progress on human rights and there is hope for more. We are also seeing the prospect of renewed cooperation on Afghanistan -- though journalists predicting a return of U.S. bases are far off the mark. Uzbekistan played a vital role in toppling the Taliban, and can once again serve as an important regional partner if we can align our views and values through deeper engagement.

17. (C) This should not come at the price of "tolerating" human rights abuses. Fortunately, it does not have to. Human rights activists on the ground themselves are adamant in telling us that they see the best hope for progress in deeper western engagement with Tashkent, rather than in further isolating this proud yet paranoid regime. EU Ambassadors in Tashkent are trying to get this message delivered to capitals, and especially to the Hague, Stockholm and Dublin, whose voices will be critical when EU sanctions are reviewed in May. The French Ambassador (an activist, three-time ambassador -- Kiev, Belgrade, and now Tashkent) will return to Paris the week of February 11 to pursue this. The U.S. can help by beginning to engage European foreign ministries, and it is clear from my EU colleagues here that they hope we will do so.

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